Blue-Collar Worker Supervisors

(O*NET 81002, 81005A, 81005B, 81008, 81011, and 81017)

Significant Points

- Although many workers with high school diplomas still rise through the ranks, employers increasingly seek applicants with postsecondary training.
- Employment in manufacturing is expected to decline, reflecting the increasing use of computers, the implementation of self-directed work teams, and leaner management structures.
- In construction and most other nonmanufacturing industries, employment of managers and the workers they supervise is expected to increase.
- Supervisors in the highly cyclical construction industry may be laid off when construction activity declines.

Nature of the Work

For the millions of workers who assemble manufactured goods, service electronics equipment, work in construction, load trucks, or perform thousands of other activities, a blue-collar worker supervisor is the boss. In addition to "the boss," blue-collar worker supervisors go by many other titles. The most common are first-line supervisor or foreman and forewoman, but titles vary according to the industry in which these workers are employed. In the textile industry, for example, these supervisors may be referred to as second hands; on ships, they may be called boatswains. In the construction industry, supervisors can be referred to as superintendents, crew chiefs, or foremen and forewomen, depending upon the type and size of their employer. Toolpushers or gang pushers are common terms used to describe blue-collar supervisors in the oil drilling business.

Although the responsibilities of blue-collar worker supervisors are as varied as the titles they hold, their primary task is to ensure that workers, equipment, and materials are used properly to maximize productivity. To accomplish this, they perform many duties. Supervisors make sure machinery is set up correctly, schedule or perform repairs and maintenance work, create work schedules, keep production and employee records, monitor employees, and ensure that work is done correctly and on time. In addition, they organize workers' activities, make necessary adjustments to ensure that work continues uninterrupted, train new workers, and ensure the existence of a safe working environment.

The means by which supervisors perform these duties have changed dramatically in recent years as companies have restructured their operations for maximum efficiency. Supervisors now use computers to schedule work flow, monitor the quality of workers' output, keep track of materials, update the inventory control system, and perform other supervisory tasks. In addition, new management philosophies that emphasize fewer levels of management and greater employee power in decisionmaking have altered the role of these supervisors. In the past, supervisors exercised their authority to direct the efforts of blue-collar workers; increasingly, supervisors are assuming the role of a facilitator for groups of workers, aiding in group decisionmaking and conflict resolution.

Because they serve as the main conduit of information between management and blue-collar workers, supervisors have many interpersonal tasks related to their job. They inform workers about company plans and policies; recommend good performers for wage increases, awards, or promotions; and deal with poor performers by outlining expectations, counseling workers in proper methods, issuing warnings, or recommending disciplinary action. They also meet on a regular basis with their managers, reporting any problems and discussing possible solutions. Supervisors may often meet among themselves to discuss goals, company operations, and performance. In companies with labor unions, supervisors must follow all provisions of labor-management contracts.

Working Conditions

Blue-collar worker supervisors work in a range of settings based on the industry in which they are employed. Many supervisors work on the shop floor. This can be tiring if they are on their feet most of their shift or working near loud and dangerous machinery. Other supervisors, such as those in construction and oil exploration and production, sometimes work outdoors in severe weather conditions.

Supervisors may be on the job before other workers arrive and often stay after others leave. Some supervisors work in plants that operate around the clock, so they may work any one of three shifts, as well as weekends and holidays. In some cases, supervisors work all three shifts on a rotating basis; in others, shift assignments are made on the basis of seniority.

Because organizational restructuring and downsizing have required many blue-collar worker supervisors to oversee more workers and departments in recent years, longer hours and added responsibilities have increased on-the-job stress for many supervisors.

Employment

Blue-collar worker supervisors held about 2.3 million jobs in 1998. Although salaried supervisors are found in almost all industries, 2 of every 5 work in manufacturing. Other industries employing blue-collar worker supervisors include wholesale and retail trade, public utilities, repair shops, transportation, and government. The vast majority of the 230,000 self-employed workers in this occupation are employed in construction.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

When choosing supervisors, employers generally look for experience, job knowledge, organizational skills, and leadership qualities. Employers also emphasize the ability to motivate employees, maintain high morale, and command respect. In addition, well-rounded applicants who are able to deal with different situations and a diverse work force are desired. Communication and interpersonal skills are also extremely important attributes in this occupation.

Motivating employees is an important function of blue-collar worker supervisors.

Completion of high school is often the minimum educational requirement to become a blue-collar worker supervisor, but workers generally receive training in human resources, computer software, and management before they advance to these positions. Although many workers with high school diplomas still rise through the ranks, employers increasingly seek applicants with postsecondary technical degrees. In high-technology industries, such as aerospace and electronics, employers may require a bachelor's degree or technical school training. Large companies usually offer better opportunities for promotion to blue-collar worker supervisor positions than do smaller companies.

In most manufacturing companies, a degree in business or engineering, combined with in-house training, is needed to advance from supervisor to department head or production manager. In the construction industry, supervisors increasingly need a degree in construction management or engineering if they expect to advance to project manager, operations manager, or general superintendent. Some use their skills and experience to start their own construction contracting firms. Supervisors in repair shops may open their own businesses.

Job Outlook

Employment of blue-collar worker supervisors is expected to grow more slowly than the average for all occupations through 2008. As the number of workers in the economy increases, so will the need to supervise these workers. Organizational restructuring and new developments in technology, however, will moderate employment growth. In addition to growth, many openings will arise from the need to replace workers who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force.

Projected job growth varies by industry. In manufacturing, employment of supervisors is expected to show little to no change despite an increase in manufacturing jobs as each supervisor is expected to oversee more workers. This trend reflects the increasing use of computers to meet supervisory responsibilities, such as production analysis and scheduling, greater involvement of production workers in decisionmaking, and the formation of self-directed work teams. These developments are not as prevalent in construction and most other nonmanufacturing industries, where the employment of blue-collar worker supervisors is expected to rise along with employment of the workers they supervise.

Because of their skill and seniority, blue-collar worker supervisors often are protected from layoffs during a recession. However, some supervisors in the highly cyclical construction industry may be laid off when construction activity declines.

Earnings

Median annual earnings for blue-collar worker supervisors were $37,180 in 1998. The middle 50 percent earned between $28,210 and $48,290. The lowest 10 percent earned less than $21,910, and the highest 10 percent earned over $71,320. Most supervisors earn significantly more than the workers they supervise. Although most blue-collar workers are paid by the hour, the majority of supervisors receive an annual salary. Some supervisors receive extra pay when they work overtime. Median annual earnings in the industries employing the largest number of blue-collar worker supervisors in 1997 were:

Nonresidential building construction	$39,700
Motor vehicle dealers	37,500
Local government, except education and hospitals	36,500
Residential building construction	35,800
Miscellaneous plastics products (manufacturing)	31,500

Related Occupations

Other workers with supervisory duties include those who supervise professional, technical, sales, clerical, and service workers. Some of these are retail store or department managers, sales managers, clerical supervisors, bank officers, head tellers, hotel managers, postmasters, head cooks, head nurses, and surveyors.

Sources of Additional Information

For information on management development programs for blue-collar worker supervisors, contact:

☛ American Management Association, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Internet: **http://www.amanet.org**

☛ National Management Association, 2210 Arbor Blvd., Dayton, OH 45439. Internet: **http://www.nma1.org**

☛ American Institute of Constructors, 1300 N. 17th St., Suite 830, Rosslyn, VA 22209.

☛ AIC Constructor Certification Commission, 466 94th Ave. North, St. Petersburg, FL 33702. Internet**: http://www.aicnet.org**

Fishers and Fishing Vessel Operators

(O*NET 79999E)

Significant Points

- The proportion of self-employed workers is among the highest in the workforce.
- Many jobs require strenuous work, long hours, and provide only seasonal employment.
- Employment is projected to decline, due to depletion of fish stocks and new Federal and State laws restricting fishing.

Nature of the Work

Fishers and fishing vessel operators catch and trap various types of marine life for human consumption, animal feed, bait, and other uses. (Aquaculture—the raising and harvesting for commercial purposes of fish and other aquatic life in ponds or confined bodies of water—is covered in the *Handbook* statement on farmers and farm managers.)

Fishing hundreds of miles from shore with commercial fishing vessels—large boats capable of hauling a catch of tens of thousands of pounds of fish—requires a crew including a captain, or skipper, a first mate and sometimes a second mate, boatswain, and deckhands with specialized skills.

The *captain* plans and oversees the fishing operation—the fish to be sought, the location of the best fishing grounds, the method of capture, the duration of the trip, and the sale of the catch.

The captain ensures the fishing vessel is seaworthy; oversees the purchase of supplies, gear, and equipment such as fuel, netting, and cables and hires qualified crew members and assigns their duties. The captain plots the vessel's course, using navigation instruments such as compasses, sextants, and charts. Additionally, vessels are equipped with electronic navigational equipment such as autopilots, loran systems, and satellite navigation systems. Ships also use radar to avoid obstacles and depth sounders to indicate the water depth and the existence of marine life between the vessel and sea bottom. The captain directs the fishing operation through the officers, and records daily activities in the ship's log. Upon returning to port, the captain arranges for the sale of the catch—directly to buyers or through a fish auction—and ensures each crew member receives the prearranged portion of adjusted net proceeds from the sale of the catch. Some captains have begun buying and selling fish via the Internet; and as electronic commerce grows as a method to find buyers for fresh catch, more captains may use computers.